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by

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Just Us Chickens

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Just Us Chickens

by

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Master's Report

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Dedications

I dedicate this report to my parents in gratitude for their unconditional love and support.

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Just Us Chickens

Erin Camille Randall, M.F.A

The University of Texas at Austin, 2011

Supervisor: Don Howard

This report chronicles the development and production of the short film, *Just Us Chickens*, written, directed, and produced by Erin Randall. The film is based on several true stories told by a Diane Hill James, who grew up in Smithville, Texas during the 1950s. The script weaves together Ms. James's experiences growing up near the famous Texas brothel, The Chicken Ranch, located in the neighboring town of La Grange. Diane and her friends would frequently spy on the brothel and once a stranger, new to town, mistook her family home as the brothel and her as a prostitute. The film, *Just us Chickens*, considers how these experiences could inform and influence the sexual identity of a young woman, and aims to clarify the contradictory expectations put upon female sexual development both then and now.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	1
SCRIPT DEVELOPMENT	4
PRE PRODUCTION	11
PRODUCTION	22
POST PRODUCTION	32
CONCLUDING THOUGHTS	40
Appendix 1: Shooting Script.....	42
Appendix 2: Film Stills and References	59
Appendix 3: Credits List.....	68
References	72
Vita	73

INTRODUCTION

A self-righteous desire to make a movie about “women” consumed me when I was seventeen years old. I don’t remember what incident in my life spurred this passion. It may have been an introduction to feminism at school, or the discovery that men directed most of the films I watched. Regardless of the reason, I bought a cheap video camera at a pawnshop and attempted to start my grandiose movie by interviewing my painting teacher, my female mentor at the time. I told her I wanted to make a movie about women, so we sat on her porch to begin the process until she asked me what I wanted to know. The camera was never turned on that day because I didn’t know what to ask or where to begin. “Think about what you want to ask,” she said. I packed up the camera, put it under my bed, and went to Sarah Lawrence College in New York to study Painting and Spanish. The desire to make films returned my last year at college, and I took a few more production classes.

After graduation, I moved back to Austin, Texas, which in the early 2000’s promised to be the next hot spot of independent filmmaking. I took an independent filmmaking class and chiseled a career as a costumer on Robert Rodriguez’ productions. His productions did not fulfill my filmmaking interests, so I applied, got accepted by, and entered the MFA film program at UT in the Fall of 2006, with the intent to follow through on my naive and unexplored drive to make movies about “Women.”

The idea for my thesis presented itself my first year in the MFA program. I assisted my classmate, Kim Hall, on her documentary about sorority girls at UT during the 1960s. We interviewed a woman named Diane Hill James, who grew up and still lives

in Smithville, Texas, an hour outside of Austin. Smithville is located near another small Texas town, La Grange, which was the home of the famous “Chicken Ranch” brothel. The brothel, established in the early 1900s, was tolerated by the local community and Texas lawmakers until the 1970s. After Kim and I talked with Ms. James about her life as a sorority sister, She told us about growing up near the famous brothel, and her stories became the basis for my thesis script.

When Ms. James was a teenager, she and her friends would spy on the brothel to see if they could catch their boyfriends going there. On one of these occasions, the girls were caught by the Madame and chased off the property. Another story was about a lost man who came to her door, mistaking her family house for the brothel. Diane was nineteen at the time, and because of the sweltering summer heat, she answered the door wearing a halter top and short shorts. After seeing her, the man felt confident he was in the right place, but Diane assumed he was there to see her mother. Diane let him into their house, and her mother greeted them in the living room, thinking he was a friend of Diane’s. The mother sent their maid to bring him a drink, and after a few moments of small talk, the mother realized his confusion and drew him a map directing him toward the Chicken Ranch. The man left terribly embarrassed, and Diane James, her mother, and the maid found the incident hilarious.

While Ms. James told us these stories as humorous anecdotes, they stuck me as rich material on which to base a narrative film. I interpreted her story of mistaken identity as a profound metaphor for the time in a girl’s life when men perceive her as a woman, yet she still perceives herself as a girl. I thought the image of the girls spying on a

brothel to catch their boyfriends perfectly illustrates our culture's contradictory sexual expectations based on gender. Ms. James's mother told her the reason the Chicken Ranch existed was so "boys would leave you good girls alone." This message, handed down from one generation to the next, justified the presence of the illegal brothel as a necessity for men. Boys were allowed to explore their "hetero"- sexuality in an established venue, outside of conventional relationship expectations. Even though this quote does not overtly say that girls will be considered "bad" if they pursue their sexual desires, I think the sentiment is implied. The experiences described by Diane James provided a perfect framework for me to develop a story about the complications of female sexual identity. With Ms. James's permission, I decided to dramatize these events and weave her stories into a script for my thesis film.

SCRIPT DEVELOPMENT

I wrote the first draft of my script in one sitting during the Spring semester of my second year in the MFA program. It is important to mention that I spoke with Diane Hill James twice about her stories. The first time was in 2006, when Kim and I interviewed her for Kim's documentary. The second time was in 2009, after I committed myself to developing her story for my thesis film. The second time I met with her, I discovered that I had imagined the details of her story differently from what had actually happened. In my mind, she was fifteen or sixteen years old, and the lost man first saw her while she was walking home. In reality, Diane was nineteen years old when the lost man came to her door and thought she was a prostitute.

I decided to keep the story in line with my misinterpretation because I didn't think it would be believable if my female protagonist were nineteen. An older teen would be more self-aware and conscious of how she was perceived, and I wanted my film to be about the brief window in a girl's life when she physically looks like a woman yet psychologically sees herself as a girl.

In the first draft of my script, I had the girl walking on the roadside when the lost man first sees her. I also made the man close to her age because I wanted to confuse the audience as to the nature of the relationship between these two characters. I wanted it to seem as if they were potential romantic partners and knew each other from the community. My aim in creating this confusion was to draw attention to the contradictory social expectations placed on young men and women in regard to their sexual behavior. I also made the male character young because I did not want him to come across as a

predator. If he were around the same age as the girl, I thought he might be more sympathetic, and it was important for me to not pass any judgment on the behavior of my characters.

The first version of the script was fun because I focused on the humor of the situation, and I received a positive response from my classmates when I presented it in our workshop. They liked the setting and the characters, but I knew that I was missing the essence of what drew me to the story in the first place, the girl's internal experience and gained self awareness.

In this first draft I also wrote in a brother character. I did this so that the girl and her mother could confuse the lost young man for a friend of the brother. In this draft, the brother appeared in the final scene, when everyone realizes the mistake, and he physically attacks the lost man in an effort to protect his sister. I realized that including this character was a mistake. What fascinated me about the original story was that the lost man stumbled into one archetypal woman's space, a home, mistaking it for a brothel, another archetypal woman's space. By adding the brother character and by having him attack the lost man, I took away the women's agency in resolving the situation themselves. I also thought that having the brother character enter into the female space would shift the story out of the Madonna vs. Whore paradigm it so neatly fit into.

I was excited that the two female spaces in my film alluded to the Madonna vs. Whore paradigm because it supplied a rich subtext in which to frame my narrative. Yet this framework also created a problem because it centered the script's conflict within the man's confusion. I did not want his psychological dilemma to be the focus because I

wanted this film to be a girl's story. Yet I did not want my girl character struggling to identify with one of these two archetypes either. At the most, I wanted her to become aware that the metaphorical road she is walking along is situated within this paradigm, and will inevitably influence her own sexual identity and behavior. But by simply having my character become aware - instead of acting upon her discovery and thereby changing- meant that I had a passive lead character.

All of the writing classes and directing classes in the UT program require that we constantly ask the question, "What does your main character want?" and "what does your main character do to get what they want?" We have been taught both in school and by viewing Hollywood films that a good story will and must answer these questions. Therefore a character must be active. I desperately wanted to write a narrative from a female-point-of-view because I felt that our cinema culture does not tell enough stories for and by woman. Ironically, I was put in the position of suggesting that femininity is inherently passive, which made me uncomfortable.

Female representation in film and media culture is burdened by an abundance of images and narratives that either sexualize and objectify women or explain female behavior from a male point of view. This imbalance in cultural authorship frequently inspires outrage in women both individually and collectively. If our agency in writing our own culture's narratives and determining our own representation is limited, then our personal mythologies are also threatened.

In the Spring semester of 2009 I took Mary Kearney's class Girls' Media and Cultural Studies. In Professor Kearney's class we broke down how "girlhood" is

represented in media, and became aware of the dominant cultural narratives about girls. Taking this class was helpful, because I needed to be able to discern if I was contributing to, or reinforcing trite narratives about girlhood with my script. Because of the subject matter, and because Louisa was passive, it was difficult to know if I was falling into clichés or not.

I feel strongly about these issues as a female filmmaker, so I was concerned about writing a story with a passive female protagonist. I wanted to grant her agency, but forcing her to be active in an effort to conform to traditional narrative film expectations felt contrived. Sexual identity develops, forms, and changes over the course of an individual's entire life span. Expecting a character in the initial stages of sexual development to go through a process of self-discovery, and then self-actualization, so she can assert her agency and thereby define the terms of her own destiny was too much to accomplish in a short film.

During the struggle to resolve my narrative concerns, I remembered what my first writing professor in the MFA program, Cauleen Smith, taught our class during her workshop. She said a short film does not have to show a character's complete transformation in order to be successful. Just taking an audience through a shift in a character's perception is enough for a short film to be a satisfying story. I also watched a short film called *Small Deaths*, made by the Scottish female filmmaker Lynne Ramsay in the 1996, which is a good illustration of Cauleen's theory.

Small Deaths tells three stories about defining moments in three different phases of a girl's life. One story is about a moment when she is very little; one when she is a

young teen; and the final story is when she is a young woman. In each of the three moments, the girl discovers that things are not always what they seem. What I find so interesting about this film is that we never see her actively react to these situations. Lynne Ramsey chooses to keep the main character passive externally in order to focus on the internal reaction. *Small Deaths* is a film about internal discovery and revelations because it demands internal participation from its audience. By not showing us how the character feels, the director insists that the audience must feel for her. After watching *Small Deaths*, I felt more confident about making a film with a passive protagonist, and I settled into the idea that my movie was going to be about a moment in a girl's life that shifts her perspective on the world and how she sees herself within it.

In the Fall semester of 2008 I applied for the Continuing Fellowship and used Diane James's story for my thesis proposal. I named the project "Just Us Chickens" because I wanted the title of the film to refer to the name of the brothel. During the Depression era, the Madame accepted chickens instead of cash in exchange for services. Because of her alternate payment plan, the property became populated with chickens and the brothel was called The Chicken Ranch.

The phrase "just us chickens" is a southern expression that refers to a song by Louis Jordan, 1946 about a chicken thief caught in the act by a farmer. A farmer, suspecting a thief in the area, stands outside of his hen house and asks out loud "who's there?" The thief reveals his hiding spot by responding "Nobody here but us chickens." My family is from the South, and I remember hearing my grandmother use the expression "just us chickens" from time to time.

Since the phrase alludes to a hen house, and my script takes place in the South, is about female spaces, and The Chicken Ranch, I thought the expression should be included in my dialogue and should be incorporated in the title. I received the Hogg Foundation Continuing Fellowship in the Spring semester of 2009. The fellowship covered the cost of tuition for two semesters and awarded me a stipend of 19,000 dollars to cover my living expenses and cost of production. I deferred the fellowship until the Spring semester of 2010 so I could take a semester off during the Fall of 2009 to raise more money for my production.

I re-enrolled the Spring semester of 2010 and planned to shoot the film during the following Summer. I wrote several more drafts of the script and named my main character Louisa because the name sounded southern and sweet. I narrowed my story down to take place in four locations: the exterior of a brothel, a country road, the exterior of Louisa's house, and the interior of her house. I did write an early draft where the girls see the lost man in a pharmacy, but I quickly wrote that scene out because I did not want trouble myself finding a pharmacy location and then dressing it to look believably period. The basic structure of the script was as follows:

1. Louisa and her friends spy on the whorehouse.
2. The girls get chased off the property by the Madame.
3. Louisa walks home and meets a man on the road whom she may or may not know.
4. She lets the man into her house because of a misunderstanding in their communication.
5. He meets her mother and their maid and everyone sits down for small talk.
6. It is revealed that he mistook Louisa for a prostitute and their home as the brothel.

7. He leaves embarrassed, and Louisa learns a lesson about how she might be perceived.

I played with the idea of having events happen over a series of days, but I didn't want to complicate my production with costume changes. It made things simpler to have all the events happen in one day. The greatest challenge that I still faced, however, was dealing with the ambiguity of Louisa's relationship to the lost man, whom I named Holt.

I wanted the relationship between Holt and Louisa to be ambiguous because I didn't want the audience to know his mistake before he did. If the audience thought that they were lovers or friends then I could sustain Holt's confusion and Louisa's naiveté as they moved from the road into the house. It was difficult to navigate this ambiguity with real time dialogue, so I incorporated a voice-over that I had used in the previous scene at the brothel. While the girls are spying on the brothel, I had them read to one another out of the pages of a romance novel. The narrative from the romance novel tells a story of two lovers traveling along metaphorical roads on the journey toward love and sexual fulfillment. I was excited by this development in my script because it let me intercut the scene on the road with the scene of the girls reading, suggesting that the interaction between Louisa and Holt was an extension of the romance novel.

By using this romance novel device in the script, I hoped to provide insight into my main character's inner world. Her ideas of sex and love are informed by Romance Novels; in stark conflict to the way love and sex are happening around her.

PRE- PRODUCTION

My classmate and friend, Johanna Witherby, was the producer for this project. She was invaluable in helping me schedule goals to reach during pre-production so we would be ready to shoot in June. Early in the spring semester, we began the search for creative people to help develop the look of the film. Because my film was a period piece set in the late 1950s or early 1960s, it was important to have believable costumes, cars, and locations. Because I was working with a limited budget, we had to come up with a ballpark time frame instead of picking a specific year. Polly Veltchev was my costume designer; Roy Rutngamlug was my director of photography; and James Fowler was my production designer.

Many films inspired the look for *Just Us Chickens*. (see Appendix 2) Two films by Terrence Malick *Badlands* (1973), and *Days of Heaven* (1978), and *The Virgin Suicides* (1999), by Sofia Coppola influenced the cinematography. I wrote the script with the cinematography in mind, so when Roy showed me his storyboards, they were very similar to images I described in my script. We watched both of the Malick films together, and I felt confident that we were speaking the same cinematic language. The natural environment is an important component in Malick's films. The use of sound design and the cinematography in both of his early films convey that Nature is just as important a character in his films as the people. Since most of my film takes place outside, I wanted the natural environment to have a similar presence. Moreover, Nature is often used in films and literature to communicate themes of sexuality, so I thought it would be appropriate to do the same. I hoped that by including Nature as a character, then the

conflict between social expectations and my character's developing sexuality would be heightened.

The Virgin Suicides (1999), by Sofia Coppola, also includes a strong sense of the natural environment. I thought about this film very early on in the writing process because it is thematically similar to my project. Her film is about teenage girl sexuality in conflict with the surrounding social expectations, and the cinematography echoes this theme. There are several sequences in Coppola's film where the teen girl actresses are lying in fields of tall grass, backlit from the late afternoon sun. These images are very romantic, innocent, and sensual, and since my film is about romantic and sexual innocence, I used this film as a visual reference when I wrote my script.

For some reason I did not talk about *The Virgin Suicides* with my cinematographer, or if I did then he forgot, because several months after we finished filming he watched it by accident and called me to say we should have shot more of my film like it. I do think that some images in my film reference the cinematography of *The Virgin Suicides*. That film was an influence, even if my cinematographer was unaware of it.

Because of my background working as a Costumer, as well as my own personal passion for clothing, I am very interested in Costume Design. Costumes can go a long way in developing a character, and for a period piece they are necessary to suspend the disbelief of the audience. I worked with a graduate student in the Theater Department at UT named Polly Veltchev, who was highly recommended by Susan Mickey, the head of the Costume Design Department. Polly and I talked about several films that influenced

the direction of the Costume Design: *Badlands* (1973) *The Last Picture Show* (1971) by Peter Bogdanovich, and *Angel at My Table* (1990) by Jane Campion. All three films are period pieces that take place during the 1950s or 1960s. *Badlands* and *The Last Picture Show* are set in small American towns, and *The Last Picture Show* takes place in Texas.

We looked at all three films for examples of how to convey period and location. I was very interested in the clothing of *Badlands* and *Angel at My Table* because they are good examples of costumes that look like clothes, not costumes. The characters in these films wear their clothes with ease and casualness: the clothes look lived in. If you want an audience to suspend their disbelief while watching a film, then having them believe the costumes are real clothes that real people are living in is extremely important.

I also looked to *Badlands* for costume inspiration because the female lead, Holly, played by Sissy Spacek, is the same age as my protagonist, and I imagined Louisa to have similar characteristics. Holly has a naiveté and a beauty that she is not yet aware of. The first time we see her in the film she is twirling a baton in her front yard, wearing a simple t-shirt and extremely short shorts. It is a provocative image, yet you know that she thinks nothing of the fact that she is showing a lot of skin and most likely sees herself as a little girl.

The biggest costume challenge I faced was considering how to dress Louisa. She needed to be dressed provocatively enough for a man to mistake her not for a woman but also for a prostitute, yet she needed to wear a convincing costume for a 1950s-60s girl.

Polly and I agreed that she should wear short shorts because it was appropriate for the time period, and it was an article of clothing that was fitting for the grey zone that

she was in, no longer a girl, but not quite a woman. We also dressed her in a blouse that pulled tight across the chest. The quality of the shirt is appropriate for a young girl. I think it is a stretch that a man would think a girl was a prostitute in the costume that we chose for Louisa, but I was willing to take that risk for the sake of provoking confusion.

My favorite characters to dress were Louisa and her two friends, Eliza-Mae and Marie. Polly and I liked the way young girls were dressed in Campion's film *Angel at My Table*, about the New Zealand writer, Janet Frame. The film spans several decades of Frame's life, and the Costume Designer made several style choices that we tried to emulate. Many of Campion's characters wore contrasting and clashing patterns, and most of the fabrics had a sense of texture. The costumes read as real clothes, but they were also interesting and dynamic to look at. Often in the effort to make costumes look "real", the choices become boring and safe. The costumes in *Angel at My Table* are believably "real" and the use of clashing patterns and different textures add dimension and depth to the image and enhance the overall cinema watching experience.

The Production Design was the most daunting part of pre-production. James Fowler is a professional set-dresser and works in the art department on many of the major productions that come through town. I first approached him because he had a shiny black 1951 Packard that I thought would be a good fit for Holt's car. James agreed to let me use it for the shoot and also agreed to be my production designer. Unfortunately, he had to work on a project during the most of my pre-production, meaning he was unavailable for much of the time and difficult to depend on. Having a professional crew person on board was both a challenge and a blessing. His experience meant he had a good perspective on

what was possible, but because I felt he was doing me a favor, it was difficult to ask him to do things, and he didn't take the project as seriously as I had hoped. But he was very generous in crucial ways and spent his weekends looking at locations with me.

I began to search for locations in April of 2010, and I based my ideas for them on Diane Hill James's description of the real places. She said that The Chicken Ranch was a small farmhouse that got bigger over time as rooms were added. She described her family house as a two-story plantation style house, which to me partially explains Holt's confusion. If I were looking for a famous brothel, I think I might also imagine it as a mansion. With these descriptions, I knew that I need the exterior of a non-descript farmhouse for the Chicken Ranch and both an exterior and an interior of a nicer house for Louisa's home.

Johanna and I spent time looking for locations in Smithville because the town is very accommodating to film projects and wanted us to be there. The biggest problem we faced was the time period issue. It was impossible, given my limited budget, to find a location in town where we could avoid all markers of modern life. So I contacted the Film Commission and described to them the kinds of locations I was looking for, hoping to find something in the countryside not too far from Austin. The Film Commission sent me a long list of potential locations, all within an hour of Austin, and for three weekends in April, James and I drove to as many as we could.

The advantage of the Film Commission's list was that all of these locations were film friendly and had worked with film crews before, so I didn't have to explain to them how invasive a film crews are. Unfortunately, most of them were only interested in

working with me if I could pay the same amount as a professional film crew. Many of these old homes had been passed down through several generations. Family members who held on to the property for sentimental attachment often couldn't afford to maintain the property. It was interesting to hear this story over and over again; it was telling about the difficult economy of small towns. Both the houses that I ended up using had the same story.

I found the brothel location first, in Manor, Texas. The Murchison House is a large two-story farmhouse that sits alone on the top of a hill surrounded by grass fields. The house is in poor condition, but at one point in time was probably very impressive. At first I thought it was too nice for the brothel, and considered it for Louisa's house, but the interior would have taken too much work to make into a 1960s-era Living room. I would have had to bring an entire truck full of antique furniture to furnish the interior, repaint, and replace doors in order to make the space a believably upper-class home in the 1960s, so I decided to use only the exterior for the brothel location instead. Coincidentally the Murchison house was also used as the Chicken Ranch in the film, *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* (1982). I don't think this amusing coincidence influenced my decision, but I did appreciate that the history of the house tied in with my story.

The location I found for Louisa's house, the Clarke Mansion, was north of Austin in Taylor, Texas, and I felt very lucky to find it. Finding a location I could afford that was believably period both inside and out was very difficult. I had looked at this location online, and the images on the owner's website made the house look huge and too fancy for what I had in mind. I decided to cross them off the list, but by accident Johanna got in

touch with the owner and set up a time for me to meet her. James and I went to the location, and we were surprised that the house was much smaller than it looked on the website photos.

The décor of the interior was in excellent condition and was filled with antiques, so most of the production design was already taken care of. The house was also a two-story white house, like the other house I had secured. I hadn't thought about it until we looked for locations, but if the houses were similar in color, then it would help sell Holt's confusion between the two locations.

The advantage of the Clarke Mansion, and the obvious selling point, was an impressive curved staircase decorated with intricate lattice woodwork. The mother in my script makes her first appearance walking down the staircase, and because Holt thinks that she is the Madame of the Chicken Ranch, the staircase in the Clarke Mansion sold his confusion completely. The owner of the house, Sherry Clarke Nichols, said that the interior had been used for a brothel location in other movies. Ms. Nichols enjoyed my story, and she agreed to let me use the location for a fraction of her usual fee. I felt extremely lucky to have found this location, and James was relieved that the production design needed was minimal. Fortuitously, the feature film he was working on simultaneously to mine was also a 1960s period piece. The prop rental house he worked with let us borrow a vintage TV and an antique couch for my production, and these items were the only production design elements we brought into the interior of the Clarke Mansion.

While I scouted locations over April weekends, I started the extensive casting process during the week. I had nine characters, which was a large cast for a small film. I knew I needed help to find quality actors, so I contacted my friend Vicky Boone, who does local casting and knows many actors. She was swamped with a project, but recommended several teenage girls for the role of Louisa and also put me in touch with her colleague, Sarah Dowling, for further casting assistance. I contacted Sarah, and for a small fee she agreed to help me with casting.

Sarah has a broad database to draw from so she brought in many actors for me to audition. I found actresses for Louisa's friends, Eliza-Mae and Marie; the Madame; and the maid, Lottie, from the auditions I held with Sarah. But nobody was right for the three most important characters: Louisa, Holt, and the mother whom I named Francis Jackson. I had always imagined Louisa to be a blonde, blue-eyed, southern belle because Diane Hill James fit that description when she was a teenager. Sarah and I found several girls who fit the look, but they were not good enough actors.

A breakdown of the script shows that Louisa has the fewest number of lines but the greatest amount of screen time, so I needed an actress who could convey a lot silently. To tell the truth, I saw my character in the middle of a life transition and didn't really know who she was yet. I didn't want her to come across as a victim or completely naive about the sexuality within and around her, but I didn't want her to be a self aware Lolita type either. Thankfully, I had the "know it when you see it" experience when I found my lead actress Devyn Smith.

Early in the casting process, Vicky Boone had recommended a young actress named Noell Coet, whom she had worked with previously. I contacted her mother, Tara Coet, who lives in Dallas and is a talent agent at The Kim Dawson Agency. She said her daughter was too busy working on other projects, but she invited me to Dallas to audition several of the other young actresses whom she represented. I was concerned about the travel costs of bringing someone to Austin, but Tara assured me that the actors's parents would cover the cost of travel for their child because opportunities like my film were an investment in their child's career, and material to build a young actor's reel. I drove to Dallas for one day and auditioned fourteen teenage girls.

The audition process was mind-numbing. Many of the Dallas girls were talented but nobody was right. Devyn came in to audition later in the afternoon, and by that time in the day I felt ill and exhausted. She lit up the room with her hyperactive, funny personality before we began, but then when the camera turned on, she became very quiet, and all that energy shifted into a silent but intense presence that felt right for the character. She didn't physically look the way I had imagined Louisa, but she brought a quality to the character that suggested she knew who Louisa was more than I did. My friend who accompanied me to Dallas was very impressed with Devyn's audition, and I noticed that I felt more alert and engaged after she left. I took note of this physical shift in my body, and even though it took me a few more weeks to make the final decision, I took my own response as a sign that I had found the lead girl for my film.

The casting process was uniquely different for each character. For the role of Francis I had a specific local actress in mind, Babs George. I had worked with her on a previous project, and because she is naturally poised and classy, always pictured her for the mother character. Francis was based on Diane Hill James's description of her real mother, whom she described as a big city girl stuck in a small town. Diane's mother felt trapped as a housewife, and even though she was a very social person and frequently hosted parties at their family house, she would also go through bouts of depression and drank too much. It made sense to me that the lost man mistook the mother as a Madame if she had a classy, edgy manner to her. I liked the idea of making the mother in my film a sexy woman because she would serve as a complicated role model for Louisa as she is starting to develop her own sexual identity.

Babs George was not available to work on my project, but after reading the script she recommended a friend of hers, Michelle Cheney. Michelle's resume was impressive, and she was interested in the part. We met for coffee, and I offered her the role while we sat there. She was classy like Babs George, and she looked enough like Devyn to be believably her mother. It felt inappropriate for me to audition her, especially since I hadn't seen any other women who were right for the part, and I sensed that she was doing me a favor. The blind risk that I took with her paid off because I am very pleased with her performance, and I enjoyed working with her.

Although casting the key female roles was very difficult, casting Holt was completely different because I had too many good people to choose from. Sarah and I initially considered a broad age range for Holt. I saw some really great performances by

men in their late 30s and early 40s who auditioned for the part ,but I wanted the audience to believe that Louisa and Holt might be romantic partners. I narrowed down the choices to men in their 20s, and I finally found Paul Montoya through a recommendation from an acting teacher I knew. Paul is young, funny, and handsome in a rugged way. I saw several brilliant actors who were very funny, but they did not fit the stereotype of the handsome leading man. I would have preferred to steer away from stereotypical casting, but in this case I wanted Holt to look as if he belonged in the pages of a romance novel, and Paul Montoya did.

PRODUCTION

Production was scheduled for six days in mid-June. Well aware that it was going to be hot, Johanna and I prepared by making sure we had plenty of water, shade, and fans. Earlier in the semester, a former student named Alex Blair approached me eager to work on my film. He wanted to work in a producing capacity, so I made him assistant producer. On set he was invaluable in making sure that we had plenty of water at all times and that all of the trash was taken care of.

Johanna and I scheduled the shoot in three parts based on locations. First we would shoot the road scenes of Holt driving and Louisa walking in Elgin. Second, we would shoot the brothel scene at the Murchison House in Manor, and third we would shoot the exterior and interior of Louisa's house at the Clarke Mansion in Taylor. All three towns were within an hour's drive to Austin and each other.

Johanna had worked very hard to secure the properties for our shoot and to obtain permission from Town Hall to shoot on our scheduled days. Although our crew was small, we still needed permission to shut down the roads, and we needed permission to setup a base camp at each location and a place to park all of our cars. We also had to rent a porta-potty for the house locations because the antique plumbing could not accommodate a crew of twenty people.

A few days before the shoot started, I received the upsetting news that our main picture car fell through. James had agreed that we could use his black Packard for free, and he was getting the engine replaced in the weeks before production. The new engine however, wasn't working, and he told me I needed to find a new car for my film.

An important lesson I learned on this shoot was that it is a foolish idea to write vintage cars into a student film script. Worse, I had written in three cars: Holt's car, the car for the local doctor visiting the brothel, and a truck that passes by Louisa on the road. Holt's car was the most important and it was almost a character by itself. It needed to be sexy and cinematic because it was tied in with the romance novel narrative, and it needed to be a beautiful, well-maintained car from the 1960s or 1950s.

James had promised his car so early on in pre-production that I had a false sense of confidence that the car situation was going to be easy and affordable. In addition, Johanna thought that we needed to have several old cars parked outside of the brothel to make it more believable. During pre-production we used our spare time to find vintage cars in good condition and tried to talk the owners into driving out to our set for a day. We asked so many people, and with the exception of one amazing woman, everyone whom spoke to declined or never showed up. I learned that it is easy to find vintage cars in good shape, but difficult to find ones the owners will let you borrow, or rent for a low price. Vintage cars in good shape rent for a lot of money on most big budget period films.

We finally found the other two picture cars during a location scout day in Taylor. We found a green vintage wagon with Grateful Dead stickers pasted on the back windows that looked in decent enough shape from a distance. The owner was a young rockabilly man who let us rent the car for a low price. He also removed the Grateful Dead stickers from the back.

The black truck that passes Louisa on the road we saw at a mechanic stop in Taylor with a "for sale" sign on it. The owner, Ray Shaw, owned several vintage cars and

he let us rent the 1948 black truck for a reasonable price, but only under the condition that his brother drove it. This situation worked out well because his brother is a very interesting looking older man, and I never got around to casting the person who drove the truck beforehand. When James's Packard fell through, the only option I had was to call Ray Shaw and ask if I could borrow his other vintage car on the lot, a 1959 red, two-door Plymouth with fins. This car was sexy and it made sense that Holt would drive it. It was too flashy for my taste, but I was lucky to even have the option. The Packard dated from 1951, and this red car dated 1959, which pushed my car almost ten years ahead of what the costume designer and I had discussed, but I really had no other choice on such short notice.

The other problem was that the red Plymouth was expensive. Ray let me rent his vintage black truck on the understanding that none of us would drive it. He would let us drive the red car only if we had insurance, and the production insurance we got thorough school did not cover picture cars. It was crucial that my actor be able to drive the red car, so I had to spend 1000 dollars for additional insurance, plus 300 dollars for the extra rental. Finding an insurance provider and negotiating with Ray took up all of my time during the three days right before the shoot. All of my conversations with Ray happened through his lecherous mechanic assistants. They never let me speak with him directly or looked at me in the eye; they always spoke to my chest. We did manage to keep our shooting schedule somewhat intact, but my nerves were completely shot before the shoot even began.

The Cinematographer, Roy Rutungamlug, and I chose to shoot on the Canon 7D digital camera for multiple reasons, one being an effort to keep the crew small. It is difficult to find committed crewmember who will remain with you for twelve hours a day, six days in a row, so the fewer people the better. I thought that the choice to go digital would mean we could have a small crew, but we still managed to have more people than I imagined, and we probably needed even more. Roy brought his good friend John Paul from Houston to be the AC, and Joshua Riehl, an undergrad who wanted to help, became our Key Grip. We had multiple people come in for a day or two at a time to fill in the holes we needed as additional Grips and Production Assistants.

The Sound department changed several times because it was the hardest crew position to fill, but we managed always to have someone recording sound. I had two fellow graduate students act as Assistant Directors, Jessie Dorfman and Drew Xanthopolous, whom we lost halfway during his second day because of an infected spider bite. Overall, it always seemed as if there were many people on set: actors, their parents, two hair and make-up people, a script supervisor, costumer designer, set dressers, an assistant producer, a producer, and a still photographer.

Because the most of the shot took place outside, we did not have a gaffer. I wanted one, but every potential lead fell through. We made sure to get Marcel Rodriguez, our former classmate, to be the gaffer during the interior scenes, but he was not available for the rest of the shoot. We managed, but it was difficult for Roy both to worry about the camera and to think about the lighting. I am pleased with the look of my movie, but there are a few shots in which it would have been advantageous for us to use a net or a silk to

cut the intense sunlight. Roy had many concerns with the camera, and on one of the shoot dates, neglecting the lighting cost me much grief.

On this day, we were filming the girls outside of the brothel, and it was difficult to get the right exposure because of the intense direct sunlight. We had silks, but they were not large enough to cover the amount of ground we needed. I had to send someone back to Austin, 45 minutes away, to rent a bigger butterfly kit from Gear Rentals. It cost me money, and it cost the production time. It was the kind of mistake that could have been avoided with more forethought and pre-planning. If we had a gaffer on the entire shoot, he or she, might have filled that gap in thought and taken the responsibility away from Roy, who was worried about the camera.

We wanted to shoot on the 7D for multiple reasons that I will still defend, but the actual camera became a huge problem during the shoot. We were shooting in extremely high temperatures, and the body of the camera, made from thick, black, heat-absorbing plastic, could not handle the extreme temperatures. The camera consistently overheated, which interfered with our workflow and became a constant hassle. My AC, John Paul, had to keep it cool with an ice pack in between takes, a chore that distracted him from his other responsibilities and slowed our production. In addition, the overheating camera kept him and Roy frustrated and on edge.

In the middle of my shoot - I think the same day I had to send someone back into town to get a large silk- the camera began to distort the image and then shut itself down completely. When the person came back with the silk, we had to send them back to town and pick up a rental camera. I cried that day on set out of sheer exhaustion and the

frustration that I had to keep spending money that I really didn't have. The car fiasco had put me well over my budget, so the cost of renting a huge silk, and then renting a camera, made me feel as if I was bleeding money. Another reason I wanted to shoot with the 7D is because they are relatively affordable. We were able to find a friend of a friend who let us borrow her camera at no cost; however this was the camera that overheated so I had to rent a camera from Omega, an item that added several hundred more dollars to my already bloated budget.

Overall, I am happy that we shot with the 7D, and I don't regret that decision. I am pleased with the quality of the image, and compared to the other digital cameras that my peers are using, such as the Red camera, it was very affordable. Any other digital camera, even the high-end professional ones, would also have overheated in the extreme conditions we were in.

Shooting film was completely out of the question, mainly due to the cost, but also because I didn't want to burden my production with the time-consuming nature of shooting film. Moreover, I was excited to have more options and to move around quickly with a smaller camera, so I might have the luxury of discovering shots. Shot lists are important, but I wanted to inject some spontaneity into the filmmaking process because I felt that my previous work was limited and stilted because of a premeditated shot list. By choosing to shoot digitally, I hoped to experience more freedom in the process of filmmaking, but I don't think I will embrace such an idealistic approach in the future.

Roy and I did get to "discover" shots. Some of these shots are in final film, and I am very glad to have them, but the process of discovering shots on set made me feel very

insecure. We had too many options, and the digital camera wasn't as flexible as I had imagined. We were using prime lenses with a manual focus, so we still had to deal with issues of focus and exposure, in addition to the camera frequently overheating. Worse, our field monitor failed because of the ancient batteries we checked out from school. Therefore, I was constantly breathing down Roy's neck trying to look in the only monitor we had, a small 7 inch screen attached to the camera. The sun also made it difficult to see the screen, so at times it felt as if we were shooting blind. To make matters worse, I wanted to "discover our shots" while we also had to coordinate shooting out of a moving vehicle.

Roy and I wanted to shoot a moving car out of another moving car, and we hadn't anticipated the complicated choreography that this process demands. He had to worry about focus, reflections, and keeping the camera steady in addition to how the image looks in the frame. We also had to coordinate the movements between the two cars via walkie-talkies. The engine of the red vintage car was so loud that my actor couldn't hear directions, and he had to coordinate driving a stubborn vintage car and act at the same time. I learned the hard way why professional movies hook the picture cars to a trailer so the actor doesn't have to worry about driving. Coordinating all the movements was very time consuming and frustrating, so my idealistic need to discover shots seemed absurd in these conditions.

The vintage cars couldn't accommodate my free-spirited approach to filmmaking. They would frequently die between camera set-ups because they could not stay in idle for long periods of time. Every single car we used broke down on numerous occasions.

Thankfully, the owners of the cars stuck around to help us get them started. On the only day I had to shoot the red car driving through the countryside, it died on us after two hours and would not turn back on. Ray's son was there to help us, and while he went into town to find the replacement part, we shot Holt standing by his dead car as if he had pulled over to the side of the road. Ray's son found the part and got the car started again, but my window for shooting the car was gone and we had to move on to the next scene. I got to discover shots, but they were determined by the circumstances that we found ourselves in, and I realized that it takes great effort to make things look breezy and spontaneous on film.

Aside from the temperature and technical challenges, the rest of my film shoot went well. I did many rehearsals with the actors before the shoot, so when we got into the scenes and the camera was on the tripod, everything went smoothly. We did have to shoot one scene twice because in the confusion of switching out the cameras. The settings were not adjusted on the new one, so the image was underexposed. Yet even when Roy and I were agonizing about the technical problems, the young girls were having a good time on set. They bonded and became good friends, which made me happy.

Working with the actors both in the rehearsal process and on set went very smoothly. I am very thankful we had as many rehearsals as we did because we made discoveries that saved me later in the editing room. The rehearsals also helped me during production because I was so wrapped up with the technical problems I didn't have to worry as much about the performances.

Rehearsing with the girls before the shoot was the most fun and rewarding experience of production. We played a variety of games with dialog from the script that contributed to the bond they developed on set. I wrote the two friends of Louisa, Eliza-Mae and Marie, to be polar opposites of each other. Eliza-Mae was written to be the more experienced, savvy girl who, was probably responsible for dragging them to the brothel in the first place. Marie was written to be younger, timid, and more conservative in her views of sexuality. Before the rehearsal process I wanted Eliza-Mae to be more of a ‘bad’ girl and to be dismissive and rude to Marie. The girl that I cast as Eliza-Mae, Courtney Anthony, had a naturally bubbly and sweet personality that I missed when we tried to make her into a “bad” girl. I directed her to be warmer and more sympathetic towards Marie. The costume designer and I also liked a costume for her that was sweeter in colors and patterns. Through direction and costume we made her nicer and the dynamic that I wrote is still there. I was very pleased with this decision because it made the dynamic between the three girls more natural overall.

I rehearsed the scene in the living room multiple times, but it was much more complicated than any of the other scenes. I think the rehearsal process made the actors more familiar and comfortable with the material, but there were still many decisions that had to be resolved on set and in the editing room. The rehearsal process solidified the Holt character for Paul Montoya. I found his performance hilarious, so I think that he knew what to do based on how funny I thought he was being.

I think the mother character did not come together until the editing room. Michelle Cheney and I played with the idea that the Francis character was slightly drunk.

We also played with the idea that she was a selfish mother. I thought these choices would make her more complicated and help confuse her with a Madame. We brought these decisions to set, but in the editing room her character overwhelmed the scene. The performances that she played more edgy made her come across as a Dragon Lady. Luckily, we tried a couple of direction choices so I had options in the editing room. Much like the problem with the Eliza-Mae character, the scene worked better when Francis played nicer. The dynamic I was interested in was still there, but because I chose the “nicer” performances, they read overall as more nuanced. I wish I had made that discovery earlier before production.

I had a difficult time making decisions about Louisa during rehearsals of the living room. Much like my confusion about her character, I just wasn’t sure how I wanted her to react when she realizes that Holt confused her with a prostitute. During this moment on set I worked Devyn very hard during the camera coverage of her, on this moment. I had initially wanted Louisa to be hurt by the discovery but when we played it in that direction something didn’t ring true. After many takes, I finally asked Devyn if she thought that was a believable response, and she said no. I told her to do what she wanted, and while I have no idea what she thought, I know that we used the footage from the takes where she chose the direction. I think this is a good example of the saying, “Casting is 90 percent of the director’s job”. Thankfully I cast a person who was more in touch with the character than I was. I’m grateful that my intuition trusted her to make choices she felt were right for the character.

POST-PRODUCTION

After the shoot I went into a depression and wanted nothing to do with the film. I felt that this project and grad school in general had cost me parts of my personal life that I didn't want to lose. I was also frustrated by the financial cost of my film and disempowered by the loss of monetary control. My social and personal life had shifted a lot in the previous year and because I had to give this project my undivided attention, I felt as if I lost an important relationship that I couldn't, and didn't, get back once the shoot was done. I was also burdened by my feelings of obligation to everyone who helped me on this film.

I felt grateful, but also uncomfortable and guilty that I had asked for so much from others and haunted that I wouldn't be able to give back the same. My personal life was unbalanced, and it was negatively affecting the way I looked at my film. I should have felt happy about what I accomplished, but instead I felt vulnerable about the cost and resentful about confronting postproduction.

Editing is the hardest part of the filmmaking process for me, the step where I feel the least confident. I entered the MFA program with no technical knowledge of editing software, so the learning curve has been very steep. Now I feel more comfortable with the technology, but my skills as an editor are very limited, and it was impossible to get any perspective on my own footage.

When I looked at my footage, all I saw were the mistakes that I made. Before I even began cutting, I made a list of all the shots I needed to redo or pick-up. The idea of doing re-shoots became terrifying, so I limited my edit to the footage that I had, and told myself that I would not re-shoot anything. I took most of that summer off, but I didn't get

the perspective I needed about my personal life, so I entered the Fall semester with the same brutal chip on my shoulder.

A friend of mine who was an undergrad several years ago and now works as an editor said she wanted to edit the project. I was extremely excited that she was interested, so we sat down together and started to string together our favorite selects. I liked the choices, she made, but after a few weeks she was swamped with work and left my project. I originally wanted to graduate in December of 2010, but I decided that if I was the one to edit, I needed to take another semester. Through the rest of the Fall semester I sifted through all my footage, choosing every moment that I liked. Then I painfully tried to string everything together with the goal of having an assembly cut by the end of the semester.

I almost got through the assembly, but Johanna's project was happened over the winter break, and I had promised her that I would produce her film since she produced mine.

Her project was just as daunting and overwhelming as mine, was although the details were vastly different. A month before her shoot began, I ran into another former undergrad, Daniel Trevino, who expressed interest in editing my film. I was excited because I was still struggling with my edit and saw the project in only a negative light. We agreed that he would start editing over the break while I was working on Johanna's film.

Winter break came and passed, and Daniel didn't spend any time with the footage. He was still interested in editing, but was distracted by other projects and shooting his own film. I never really recovered from Johanna's shoot because school started up right away, and I worried about my incomplete assembly cut. I finished my assembly in February and showed it to Daniel. He liked what he saw and he promised that after a couple more weeks, he would be able to devote more attention to my film.

At the beginning of the semester I had also taken on a work-study job developing online content for KUT's website with their producer Rebecca McInroy. The job was demanding, and even though it took away precious time that I needed to devote to my thesis, I really liked it. I helped Rebecca produce, shoot, and edit small documentaries about local artists. I appreciated that I was doing creative work that had a much smaller scope than my thesis project, and it was a job in which I felt more in control. These projects are short and doable, not like the unwieldy, ambitious, beasts that I was creating in grad school.

I have frequently felt confused and frustrated in the director position because at this level of filmmaking we are required to wear more hats than just that of the director. We also have to rely on the talents of so many other people that often our vision is compromised through this collaboration, and it is difficult to know what to embrace, collaboration or personal vision. Then too, depending on the outcome of the project, it is difficult to know how and where you succeeded. I think the concept of collaboration is potentially exciting, but as I experienced with my thesis film, the experience of directing often leaves me dumbfounded and overwhelmed by the responsibility to justify the hard

work of many other people. I missed the feeling of empowerment you get when you create something by yourself, without depending on so many others. For this reason, I was eager to work at KUT on small projects.

The first project I did with Rebecca at my KUT job was a small bio piece about a woman whom I strangely met on the set of my thesis film. When Johanna and I were looking for vintage cars to populate the front of the brothel, we left notes on old cars asking if the owners were interested in being in a movie. We only got one response, and it was from the owner of a green 1969 vintage truck, Michele Fitzgerald. She came out to my set one day in her truck and I was struck by how interesting her life is as well as grateful that she came out so we could use her truck. She is a midwife, and when Rebecca asked me who I wanted to do a bio piece on, I said Michelle.

Creating small films about interesting ‘real’ people helped me put all the negativity I was feeling about my film and about film school into perspective. I was struggling personally with what was really important in my life and what was truly meaningful to me. I had just sunk much time and energy into a project and into a creative field that seemed to cost me other valuable dimensions in my life, and I questioned the reward. I don’t think making a piece about Michelle solved this dilemma for me, but I do think making a film about a woman whose life work, midwifery, is undeniably meaningful helped me associate more meaning to the filmmaking process and helped me move forward with my thesis.

Right after I finished the piece about the midwife Michelle, Daniel was able to start editing. In his first session, he reorganized my timeline and made some choices that

I really liked. In the first page of the script, I had Louisa walking through country roads. My intent was to film her surrounded by nature in extreme close-ups in order to capture her sensuality. I had included a brief scene where a truck passes by her on the road, and in the back of the truck she sees a woman, one of the prostitutes from the brothel, surrounded by several chicken cages. She shares a moment with this woman and keeps walking. I shot this scene during production and included it in the beginning of the assembly cut. Daniel brilliantly moved it to the end of the film, which gave the film a much more meaningful ending. In my cut, the film ended with Louisa watching Holt drive off embarrassed. In Daniel's cut she watches Holt drive off, but we are then thrust back onto the road where she sees the prostitute drive past her in the chicken truck. I think this ending speaks to my bigger narrative concerns in the movie which are the contradictory messages women receive about sexuality.

After watching his first cut, I felt for the first time that I might have a film I could be proud of. This feeling also inspired my confidence in Daniel as an editor, so I agreed to his wish to work on cuts alone. He wanted to take over as the main editor meaning I had to relinquish a lot of control, which was a relief but also difficult to manage.

Daniel worked very hard on my project and was sensitive and protective about his choices. At times we had difficult feedback sessions because he defended his cuts strongly and we struggled to communicate. I did not resist when he cut out sections of dialogue, and even when he cut out the entire character of the Madame, but it was very difficult for me to let go of specific beauty shots and Holt's performance in the final scene.

I loved Paul Montoya's performance in the living room scene, and I believed every moment of his utter humiliation when he realizes his mistake. My cuts during this scene were long and lingering, and I still miss that quality when I watch my final edit. I directed all the scenes with a slow pace, but Daniel's cuts picked up the pace. In feedback sessions other people supported this decision, so I agreed to it.

Ironically, in my attempts to give myself more options by shooting digital, I limited my shot choices. I wanted to stay away from conventional Wide Shot, Medium Shot, Close-up coverage in my film, but by taking liberties in my filmmaking approach, I paid in the editing room. On set I was consistently more interested in the close-ups, and even though I made sure to get wide angles, I didn't stay in them for long because I wanted to hurry up and cover the performance in a tighter shot.

Daniel was very frustrated by this limitation because he thought we needed longer wide-shots and more space between my close ups. I agree, and I'm surprised by my lack of foresight. I think that I had just discovered the power of good close ups before I made this movie, and because I wanted the action to derive from looks between people, I knew the close-ups were important. Daniel was constantly trying to replace close ups with wider coverage, and I questioned his decision every time. I think Daniel and I worked well together, and through our pushing and pulling against each other's opinion, we made a film we are both proud of.

Terrence Malik's films influenced me again during post production. I used the score from *Badlands*, Carl Orff's *Gassenhauer Nach Hans Neusiedler* (1536), as the

temp track to cut my film to. I chose *Gassenhauer* because it has a childlike, dreamy quality that added a lightness to the tone of my film, which helped steer it away from melodrama. I also like this song because it captures Louisa's innocence in a series of images that sexualize her. My cousin Andy Sharp is a musician and wanted to try to do my score. I showed him a cut with the music from *Badlands*, and he experimented with a couple of melodies.

The first melody Andy tried was on a piano and while it was very cinematic, it also felt melodramatic, and I had an uncomfortable feeling when I watched it with the film. It made the tone of my film too serious, and I had a hard time letting go of the Carl Orff piece. We had another session in which he used a smaller keyboard whose notes were not as serious as those in the previous piano track. The quality of these keys sounded childlike, which is what I like about the Carl Orff piece. The next piece Andy scored I really liked. He added some synthesizer strings to it, which adds more texture to the music, and I was satisfied with the results.

Daniel Stuyck did my color correction and had the daunting task of matching footage shot at sunset to footage shot at high noon. I hadn't intended to mix this footage, but Daniel Trevino created beautiful sequences with them and we consulted with Daniel Stuyck before we committed to them. He said it shouldn't be a problem. When we sat down to color correct, however, the only way to solve this mismatching issue was to steer most of the footage towards the sunset colors. I wasn't completely happy with this choice. It meant that we had to dial an orange cast over everything, and Devyn's skin tones turned orange very quickly. My main feedback during the color correction session

was, “Can you make her less peachy”. Ultimately I think the color looks good, and I’ve accepted turning the color to match the sunset. I do miss much of the midday color, and you can still notice a shift in light directionality from shot to shot during the road sequences. These sequences are supposed to be dreamy and represent an internal space so establishing a specific time of day is not ultimately as important as it could be if I wanted to be more literal.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

As I wrap up this project and remember its history, I realize that I my narrative didn't stray far from my misinterpretation of Diane Hill James's story. The movie is close to the way I imagined the sequence of events unfolding. I am glad that I saw this project through, since it captured my imagination the first year of grad school. However, I received feedback from Andy Garrison after he watched a cut that makes me wish I had developed the story further.

Andy said that the narrative is really about the relationship between the mother and the daughter. I couldn't push my edit into that direction because of my footage, but I did take that comment to heart. Now when I watch the film during my sound mix, I do wish I could have taken the story further away from my initial concept to see what I would have discovered. I have noticed that it is difficult for my fellow classmates and me to let the stories develop further on paper. I think because we know we have to actually make the film, we want to make decisions so we can move forward with production; the idea of going deeper into the story means that the production elements might change and that can be frightening to contemplate.

Writing the events that have happened over the past year has been cathartic. Going over events and relationships a year later helps me to consider a different perspective on the situation and to distance myself from the stress of those months. I think this was an ambitious project and while most of this year I remembered all the things that went wrong, writing this report helps me to see all the things that went right

and to recognize the generosity of all the people who believed in my vision enough to see it through with me. Even though I struggled with collaboration and confidence in this project, I can look to the confidence of my fellow collaborators to find the strength I need to believe in this film.

APPENDIX A: Script

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - DAY

A pair of saddle oxfords kick up dust on the side of a dirt road. Soft brown curls dance against slender female shoulders in the summer breeze. A girl's voice slithers like mist through the warm air.

GIRL'S VOICE (O.S.)
Virginal, pale, and plump as a
summer peach, she was the kind of
girl a man could not easily forget.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD, BLACK CAR - DAY

We cut to images of tires on the road.

The Hood of a black 1951 Packard boldly pushes through the backdrop of Texan farmlands and big open sky.

GIRL'S VOICE (O.S.)
And as much as he tried escaping
the echoes of her siren song, the
roads of memory kept leading back
to her.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - DAY

A Girl's hand taps a stick against a barbed-wire fence holding back a field of white cotton blossoms.

GIRL'S VOICE
Those delicate hands, that innocent
walk... He found himself careening
toward her and everything that
could have been.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD, BLACK CAR - DAY

A man's hand hangs outside the driver's window. It taps on the side of the shiny black car in rhythm with the girl's lilting narration.

In the front seat of his car a hand drawn map flutters against the white leather.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - DAY

The sound of a TRUCK approaching makes the girl, LOUISA (16), turn.

THE DRIVER of a green truck tips his hat at Louisa as he passes by.

DRIVER
Miss Louisa.

LOUISA
Hello Jasper.

She waves at him as the truck barrels by. In the back of the truck are several cages filled with chickens. Louisa smiles at their CLUCKING.

ELIZA-MAE'S VOICE (O.S.)
She wandered her days aimlessly,
hoping he would turn up around each
corner. But, all she saw was a fog
of longing.

As the dust on the road dies down, Louisa makes out the figure of a WOMAN sitting on top of the cages in the truck bed. The woman wears a formal suit and a rich, purple feather in her hat.

The woman locks eyes with Louisa and smiles. Louisa averts eye contact but back as the truck melts into the horizon line.

TITLE: JUST US CHICKENS

EXT. FIELD - DAY

The sound of giggling carries over grows louder as...

Three pairs of saddle oxfords attached to skinny girl legs lay in a field. One pair shudders then taps restlessly.

A girl's hand holding a blade of grass slowly runs it along the forearm of another girl's arm.

MARIE
Stop!

MARIE (15) opens her eyes, her body shivering. The blade of grass held by Louisa stops just a inch north of Marie's elbow crease. The third girl, ELIZA- MAE (15) lays on her stomach reading a book.

LOUISA
Close.

Marie pulls her arm back and scratches it.

MARIE
That tickles.

LOUISA
Do it to me.

Louisa hands her friend the blade of grass, and Eliza-Mae watches jealously.

ELIZA-MAE
I want to try.

MARIE
Wait your turn.

LOUISA
Keep reading to us from your book

Eliza- Mae smirks, thumbs through pages of her book.

ELIZA-MAE
Fine then

Louisa holds out her arms to Marie and closes her eyes.

INT. BLACK CAR - DAY

From the back seat of the 51' Packard we see a man's silhouette driving down a country road. His arm is out the window, his hand pushes against the wind.

ELIZA-MAE (O.S.)
Hector had driven all night and day
to be with Maryann and the summer's
heat had swollen his desire for
her.

EXT. FIELD - DAY

Louisa laughs.

LOUISA
Eliza-Mae!!

Marie stops stroking Louisa's arm and Eliza-Mae puts the book down.

ELIZA-MAE
What?

MARIE
What are you reading to us?

ELIZA-MAE
What? It's a really good book.

MARIE
Where did you get that?

ELIZA-MAE
My mama's night stand.

Marie eyes Eliza-Mae suspiciously.

ELIZA-MAE (CONT'D)
She let me borrow it. She said I
might learn something.

Marie stares at her in silence, unsure of what to say.

ELIZA-MAE (CONT'D)
Do you want me to stop, Marie?

MARIE
No. I didn't say that.

LOUISA
Keep going.

Louisa holds out her arm to Marie.

EXT. ROAD - DAY

Louisa walks along the side of the road. Her arm brushes through the tall grass on the side of the road. Sweat gathers at the back of her knees. Louisa un-sticks her hair from the back of her neck and pulls it to the side.

Shielding her eyes from the sun with her hand, Louisa squints at a white house through the fields of tall grass.

ELIZA-MAE (O.S.)
There were moment's when he swore
the summer breeze had drifts of her
scent, but he figured that was just
his mind playing tricks on him.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD, BLACK CAR - DAY

The black car guns it faster down the road.

EXT. FIELD - DAY

Marie brushes over the crease in Louisa's elbow with the grass. Louisa doesn't open her eyes, so Marie keeps dancing the grass up her arm and onto her shirt.

ELIZA-MAE
Needless to say, he was not the
only one restless with longing...
Apparitions of him titillated her
more than she liked to admit.

EXT. FIELD - DAY

Louisa opens her eyes. Marie is brushing the grass over Louisa's nose and face.

MARIE
You never said when.

Marie and Louisa smile at each other tenderly and LAUGH.

ELIZA-MAE (O.S)
Shh. Don't go scaring off the
entertainment.
Here comes our next customer.

INT. BLACK CAR - DAY

From inside the car, a driver's POV. We see Louisa walking down the road. She smiles at the driver, and her hair blows in the wind.

We see the black Packard stop in the middle of the road and turn around.

EXT. FIELD. DAY

Louisa grabs a pair of binoculars from Eliza- Mae

LOUISA
Let me see! Is he handsome?

Through the binoculars we see a blue Lincoln pull up to a dilapidated white farm house. The house is surrounded by a picket fence, and set far back from the road.

ELIZA-MAE
It looks like Doctor Johnson.

LOUISA
It sure is.

MARIE
Maybe someone is sick?

Marie tries to wrestle the binoculars from Louisa, but Eliza-Mae snatches them away and squints into the lenses.

MR. JOHNSON gets out of his car. He checks his reflection in the car window, fixes his tie, fixes his hat, checks his reflection again before he walks through the gate and onto the front porch.

ELIZA-MAE
It doesn't look like it.

Louisa grabs the binoculars and looks through them.

EXT. CHICKEN RANCH - DAY

Doctor Johnson waits on the porch until A WOMAN in a provocative dress opens the door. He takes off his hat as he steps in.

EXT. FIELD - DAY

MARIE
Let me see, Lou.

Louisa passes them to Marie.

Marie grabs the binoculars and looks through them. Eliza pulls out a pack of cigarettes.

MARIE (CONT'D)
Mama says that woman is the devil
but is always really nice to her in
the grocery store.

LOUISA
I wonder if Mrs. Johnson knows.

ELIZA-MAE
I doubt it.

MARIE
You really think boys from school
would come by?

Louisa shrugs her shoulders.

LOUISA

I don't know I just want to check.

Eliza-Mae lights up a cigarette, and takes an awkward puff.

MARIE

Where did you get that?

LOUISA

From her mama's night stand.

MARIE

Did she let you borrow that too?

ELIZA-MAE

Don't be such a square Marie. Have a drag.

MARIE

NO!

Eliza-Mae hands it to Louisa who takes a drag and has a coughing fit. Marie looks disappointed and pulls at the grass in the ground

LOUISA

What else did your mama want you to learn.

Eliza-mae rolls her eyes and takes the book back.

ELIZA-MAE

here you read?

EXT. DRIVEWAY - AFTERNOON

Louisa turns onto a long driveway and walks toward another white farm house in better condition.

The black Packard pulls in behind her and maintains equal pace with her.

Louisa walks along the driveway and the black Packard drives slowly alongside her.

ELIZA-MAE (O.S.)

Her days were haunted by the
visions both ecstatic and
monstrous, and at night she worried
that this need for him would
destroy her. A risk she was willing
to take.

MARIE (O.S.)

That sounds scary.

EXT. FIELD - DAY

Louisa flops on her back dramatically.

LOUISA

It is supposed to be romantic.

(Like she agrees)

At this, a screen door CREEKS and slams in the distance. The girls see Dr. Johnson emerge onto the porch. He fumbles a while in the driveway, and the woman from the opening (hair mussed) steps outside and begins feeding the chickens.

MARIE

Seems like a lousy romance to me.

As the chickens peck, Louisa looks from them to the romance book. She pulls it to her, fingers an aged lipstick ad that's wedged into it like a bookmark.

LOUISA (O.S.)

Theirs was an explosion of love
just waiting to happen.

EXT. FARMHOUSE.DAY

The driver of the Packard, HOLT (24), and Louisa share shy glances.

Louisa walks toward the nice, white farm house, and Holt peers out a window of the black Packard beside her.

Louisa has a slight swing in her step.

HOLT

Evening.

LOUISA

Evening.

HOLT
How are you?

LOUISA
Just fine..... and yourself?

It is hard not to smile because Holt is cute.

HOLT
I'm better now that I found this place.

LOUISA
You lost?

HOLT
I thought I was until I saw you back there.

He shakes the hand-drawn map.

HOLT (CONT'D)
But you know this still doesn't look right to me.

LOUISA
Well it looks right to me.

Holt gives her a puzzled look.

LOUISA (CONT'D)
Meaning you can see this place from the road.

HOLT
Well I passed by here several times and still missed it. Maybe ya'll need to put up a sign or something.

Louisa laughs at this.

EXT. FIELD - DAY

The explosion of a gun sends a nearby group of chickens pecking around in the field, flying into the air.

The three girls scramble to their feet as a woman with big Texas hair, MS JESSIE, (50s) walks toward them holding a shotgun.

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It is hard not to smile because Holt is cute.

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LOUISA
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The three girls scramble to their feet as a woman with big Texas hair, MS JESSIE, (50s) walks toward them holding a shotgun.

MS JESSIE
My apologies. I thought I saw a
pack of coyotes, but it is just you
chickadees.

Marie looks stricken, and takes off over the field. Ms.
Jessie calls after.

MS JESSIE (CONT'D)
I'll see you in Church Marie
Fowler?

Eliza-Mae and Louisa scramble to gather their things. Ms.
Jessie turns her attention to them.

MS JESSIE (CONT'D)
Y'all looking for your daddies?
Boyfriends?

ELIZA-MAE
No ma'am just passing though.

MS JESSIE
Well I suggest you get on out of
here.

LOUISA
Yes ma'am.

The two girls grab hands and start walking away from Ms.
Jessie trying hard not to laugh. Their walk turns into a run
and two pairs of saddle oxfords go running through the
fields.

EXT. FARMHOUSE. DAY

Holt and Louisa stop in front of the house. In the side yard
an African-American woman, LOTTIE, hangs laundry out to dry.

She watches Holt and Louisa talk.

LOUISA
Seeing as there's no sign out
front, you sure you in the right
place?

Holt looks over at Lottie hanging sheets on the line along
with several slips.

HOLT
Yeah. Looks like it. I'm Holt
Jacobs.

He holds out his hand. She shakes it.

LOUISA
Louisa Jackson. But my friends call
me Lou.

HOLT
Nice to meet you Lou. Say, is she
the lady of the house?

LOUISA
Who Lottie? No, I think the lady is
inside. Would you like to come in?

HOLT
Don't mind if I do.

Louisa seems happy to hear this.

HOLT (CONT'D)
Just give me one second.

Louisa runs inside.

Holt gets out of his car and takes off his jacket, replacing
it with a western jacket. He notices Lottie eyeing him so he
waves at her. She smiles back.

INT. JACKSON HOUSE - DAY

Louisa runs inside and bounds halfway up a flight of stairs.

LOUISA
Mama! Mama! You better come
downstairs.

She runs back to the door and opens it for Holt to come in.

LOUISA (CONT'D)
Did you change into a different
jacket?

HOLT
You caught me. I just thought that
maybe this was more appropriate.

A woman, FRANCIS (mid 40s) walks down the stairs. She is
wearing heels, a house coat, and is smoking a cigarette.

Louisa looks slightly embarrassed by her mother's appearance.

FRANCIS
What were you saying Lou?

Lou silently nods towards Holt.

LOUISA
We have a visitor

FRANCIS
Hello there. How do you do?

HOLT
Holt Jacobs

FRANCIS
Nice to meet you Holt. You'll have
to pardon my apperance I wasn't
expecting anybody... You friends
with Lou.

She catches her reflection in a mirror and tries to fix her
hair.

HOLT
Oh we go way back.

He winks at Louisa.

Francis notices Louisa's interest.

FRANCIS
Well then you can just call me
Francis. Why don't we all sit down.

HOLT
Yes ma'am

They all sit awkwardly for a moment.

HOLT (CONT'D)
Francis you have a lovely place
here.

FRANCIS
Why thank you. I guess it is sort
of quaint. I miss the city life
myself.

Lottie walks in the back door.

FRANCIS (CONT'D)
Would you like something to drink
Holt?

HOLT
I would yes, thank you.

LOUISA
Lottie, will you get our guest a
coke please.

Francis and Lottie share a look, that Louisa is acting so
self assured.

HOLT
Y'all have a really nice place.

FRANCIS
Thank you.

HOLT
I'm sorry I already said that,
guess I'm nervous.

FRANCIS
There's nothing to be afraid of.
It's just us chickens.

Francis leans over to ash her cigarette and reveals her
cleavage.

Holt laughs nervously. Lottie brings in a Coke.

HOLT
Thank you ma'am.

He takes a sip. Silence again.

FRANCIS
So, Holt are your folks from around
here? I don't believe I've met any
Jacobs. I think a Henry Jacobs used
to run the pharmacy downtown. Are
you related to him?

HOLT
No Ma'am. I'm from just North of
Houston. Never been here before,
but I've heard great things.

LOTTIE
A city boy?

Lottie looks at Francis, who raises her eyebrow in Louisa's
direction.

FRANCIS
Oh one of my kind then. How do you
know my Lou?

HOLT
Oh no ma'am we just meet.

LOUISA
He was looking for you.

FRANCIS
Oh my mistake! Louisa why didn't
you say something!

LOTTIE
You selling something?

Holt pulls out his wallet.

HOLT
I'm so sorry, I'm not selling. I
don't really know how things work
here? Do I pay now or pay later?

Francis looks confused. Holt looks at each woman in the room
waiting for a response. He looks at Louisa and smiles, then
rubs his hand against her knee.

Louisa gasps, and jumps up. Lottie tries to stifle back her
laughter.

FRANCIS
Just what do you think you are
doing?

LOTTIE
This 'aint the chicken ranch
mister.

Holt's face turns beet red.

HOLT
(Stuttering)
I-im-i- really sorry. So sorry. I
apologize deeply.

FRANCIS
You better get out of here.

He bolts out of the house.

They watch him fumble with his keys through the window.

FRANCIS (CONT'D)
Louisa, what did you say to him?

LOUISA
I didn't say anything.

Francis starts laughing. Louisa stands/sits in shock.

FRANCIS
Guess Mama's little baby is all
grown up.

LOTTIE
She thinks she is.

Lottie and Francis laugh.

FRANCIS
Did you see the look on his face?

LOTTIE
Just like a fox caught in the hen
house.

Louisa pouts on the couch.

FRANCIS
I better go tell the poor boy where
he is headed.

Francis goes out to the car and points toward the road giving
Holt, who sits petrified in the drivers seat, directions.

Lottie notices Louisa's expression and sits next to her on
the couch.

LOTTIE
You know why those ladies exist
over there...So girls like you can
stay good.

Louisa breaks off from her and bursts through the porch door.

EXT. SIDE YARD - AFTERNOON

Louisa runs to the clothesline where white garments billow on
the summer breeze.

Peering out from behind a row of drying slips, Louisa watches
the black Packard peel away on the drive. Something in her
looks stung.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - DAY

Louisa walks along the country road. The camera shoots her in a more eroticized way. Sweat on her lip, curve of her waist.

LOUISA (V.O.)
Yes, Maryanne was the kind of girl
Hector could not easily forget.

The Black Packard glides toward Louisa in the setting sun.

LOUISA (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Those curls, those hips, and their
sway.

Holt flashes his smile and tips his hat.

LOUISA (V.O.) (CONT'D)
...and she could never forget the
first time they meet.

THE END

APPENDIX B: Film Stills and References



The Virgin Suicides (1999)



Just us Chickens still #1



The Virgin Suicides (1999)



Just us Chickens still #2



The Virgin Suicides (1999)



Just us Chickens still #3



Days of Heaven (1978)



Just us Chickens still #4



Badlands (1973)



Just us Chickens still #5



Badlands (1973)



Just us Chickens still #6



Small Deaths (1996)



Just us Chickens still #7



An Angel at My Table (1990)



Just us Chickens still #7



An Angel at My Table (1990)



Just us Chickens still #8

APPENDIX C: Credits

CAST

Louisa Jackson	Devyn Smith
Holt Jacobs	Paul Montoya
Francis Jackson	Michelle Cheney
Lottie	Michelle Cheney
Marie	Chloe Clark
Eliza-Mae	Courtney Anthony
Dr. Johnson	Derek Israel
Truck Driver	Jackie Shaw
Prostitute	Heather Kafka

CREW

Directed by
Erin Randall

Written by
Erin Randall
Jennifer Côté

Produced by
Johanna Witherby

Director of Photography
Roy Rutngamlug

Production Designer
James Fowler

Costume Design
Polly Veltchev

Hair and Make-up
Tara Cooper
Charli Brath

Edited
Daniel Treviño

Music
Andy Sharp

Sound Design
Andres Lombana Bermudez

Assistant producer
Alex Blair

Casting
Sarah Dowling

Assistant Directors
Jessie Dorfman
Drew Xanthopoulos

Script Supervisor
Melissa Nierman

Catering
Ben Kullerd

Assistant Camera
John Paul Bujnoch

Gaffer
Marcel Rodriguez

Key Grip
Joshua Riehl

Grips
Therese Tran
Greg Miller
Rogelio Salinas
Forest Croft
Alex Schwartz
Ben Slamka
Justin Feng

Sound Recordist
Andy Huber
Lauren Kusnierz
Cathryn Snyder
Jaime Cano
Rogelio Salinas

Set Dressers
Jo Huang
Ying Liu
Noël Wells
Chase Staggs,

Still Photographer
Patrick Rusk

Colorist
Dan Stuyck

Titles
John Moore

Special Thanks To
Tom and D'Arcy Randall
Vicky Boone
Heather Mitchell
Nevie Owens
Arwen Tedhams
Danny Hamilton
Michele Fitzgerald
Ray Shaw
Winnie May Murchison
Sherry Nichols at Clarke Mansion
Jose Hernandez,
Kim LeBlanc
Josh Kinney
Gloria Holder,
Gabe Proctor
Jeremy Gruy
Susanne Kraft
Andrew Garrison

Don Howard
Mary Kearney
Charles Ramírez-Berg
Jennifer Smith
Wendi Anthony
Scott Clark
The town of Taylor Texas
The Hogg Fellowship

REFERENCES

Badlands, a film directed by Terrence Malick, 1973.

Days of Heaven, a film directed by Terrence Malick, 1978.

An Angel at My Table, a film directed by Jane Campion, 1990.

Small Deaths, a short film directed by Lynne Ramsay, 1996.

The Virgin Suicides, a film directed by Sofia Coppola, 1999.

VITA

Erin Randall moved to Brisbane, Australia for ten years, shortly after her birth on May 12, 1978 in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. She returned to the United States in 1989, when her family settled in Austin, Texas. Erin left Texas to attend high school and college on the East Coast. She graduated from Northfield Mt. Hermon School in 1996, and from Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, New York with a B.A in Liberal Arts, in 2001. She returned to Austin in 2002 and worked as a union costumer on films produced in the local area. She entered the MFA Program in the Department of Radio-Television-Film at the University of Texas at Austin in 2006. She received the Hogg Continuing Fellowship in 2010.

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